

Tape #2
April 15.

SECOND CONVERSATION WITH DR. KENNETH CLARK

A. We were talking about Lincoln and our conversation between tapes -- you said that one judges a man by his choice of a said issue on which he will put the big money on the card, is that about right?

B. Yes, I think that each of us from day to day, in the total pattern of our lives, must make choices as to what we are really going to stand for and stand on, and take the big risk for, I suspect in the final analysis, we are judged by our contemporaries and by others on what we choose and what we consider important and salient enough to put the big stakes on and to take the big risk for.

A. Well, Lincoln dodged the abolitionists like poison.

B. Of course he did.

A. Now, how do we judge this fact about Lincoln?

B. Well, history has judged Lincoln in terms of the priority and the importance of the Union.

A. How do you judge him?

B. Well obviously, I must now judge him on that ground because ostensibly or on the surface, we have the union which he sought to preserve and the present Civil Rights trouble is being fought out within a unified nation, and if you put Lincoln's decision in a historical perspective, I suppose the rational and intelligent judgment is -- that this was a correct choice that he made --

A. Would you imply the same amount of argument to say -- some hypothetical Lincoln we could produce now who would say the most immediate question is not the most immediate drive for Civil Rights? Hypothetically, say -- only in some point, not go all the way you want it to go, ahead of racial justice.

B. Well, lets not be too hypothetical, because I think we get -- we can get a lot of specific examples of this. Lets take the Communists in World War II -- prior to the Hitler-Stalin pact, the Communists were very concerned about racial discrimination and segregation in the United States, and they were busy telling Negroes -- don't join a segregated army -- you know -- fight for your right to be a full American, etc. --

A. Can we cut back to Lincoln again on this matter of --

B. I think we were saying something just before the phone rang -- yes, I want to continue this about the Communists, because I think they put in perspective this problem of practical and expedient determination of what one says and what one does. After the Hitler-Stalin Pact, the Communists changed their tune and their advise to the American Negroes -- the Nazis were not so terrible any longer, there were all sorts of justifications and of course there were many Communists who were disillusioned at that time and left the party. But, when Hitler attacked Russia, in spite of the Pact, then the Communists were not any longer so concerned with the indignities heaped upon Negroes in a segregated army -- they wanted all Negroes to go out and volunteer to fight the Facist, no matter what the conditions under which they were required to fight, you see, the same people who were trying to seduce ~~him~~ me into the party with crocodile tears about the humiliation of segregation, etc. were not calling me-- and I mean literally, the same persons were talking to me now after Hitler attacked Russia -- and calling me a Black because I was still concerned with segregation. To this day, I am thankful that whatever it was that made me suspicious of them, when they seemed so much on my side, saved me from ever getting involved with them,

because now -- on one end you could say -- look, these people were just being practical, they were establishing what was a priority to them, what was salient -- to them the relationship with Russia or the future of Russia was more important than how any individual Negro felt about being segregated --

A. Well, that is the way Lincoln felt about it. Lincoln couldn't have cared less presumably about what any individual Negro felt --

B. Frankly I don't think that -- I think that Lincoln basically cared--

A. Well, lets read his words -- take them for what they were -- I will save it, I am not nor ever have been in favor of bringing about any way
equality of the white
and black races.

B. Do you know what I really think about that? I don't believe that. I think he said it, but this problem of political expediency can cut both ways, you see. One of the fascinating things -- gosh, I don't know how to preface this, maybe I shouldn't preface it -- just ask your reaction to it after I say it -- I think of ~~x~~ of the peculiar and fascinating things about some Americans is the apparent awkwardness that they seem to have in dealing with deep ethical problems -- that actually they are more ethical at times, than they want to pretend, you see. For example, I think the Marshall Plan -- a practical politician insists upon the pose that this is a purely practical economic expediency. I sometimes seem to be rather caught dead than offering an equally tenable rationale, that this is a matter of human concern and compassion. Now frankly, I think that this is part of the turmoil, turbulence, the conflict, the chaos that American races imposes on otherwise decent Americans -- that they must mask, or seem to go to the trouble to mask their deficiency

in order to be in a position to act decent.

A. Lets take William Lord Garrison -- now he was certainly explicit enough -- he would damn the Union to hell and said so, on the matter of abolition -- not on the matter of equality but on the matter of abolition of slavery. After the war, he couldn't have cared less, but he cared about the future of the freed Negro -- in fact he was against giving them the vote . Now what do we make of this in that case?

B. I think this is another symptom of what I call the American moral skitzophrenia, which is part and parcel of a Christian democratic nation, emerging and establishing the tremendous experiment in government based upon ethical ideals at the same time that it has human slavery, you see. I just don't think that America ever got over this deep ethical moral problem, and you get these symptoms taking various forms - - -

A. it is not -- but lets take a bigger jump, then. If we put D and W and Abraham Lincoln and Ethiopia the campaign and the Communists in the same ^{pot} ~~mix~~ -- what we are coming out with is the complication of -- you might say -- history and ethics in politics, aren't we?

B. Yes, I would put them in the same pot, but I wouldn't say they have all become indistinguishable because they are in the same pot -- They are in the same pot in a way, but I think Americans are in a peculiar place in that pot.

A. Tell me about that now.

B. Well, I think the peculiar thing about America is that this is the only nation that ever started out saying that it was going to develop a system of government based upon ethics. Wherever you found

the ethical problem and the insensitivity problem and the inhumanity-to-man problem anywhere else, you found it almost as a "natural spontaneous expression of the animal in man or the problems of man -- but the problem with America is that you had Jefferson, you had Franklin and you had these peculiar combinations of philosopher-politicians, you see, who had an opportunity that most other people never had -- namely to establish a philosophical and ideological base for a government.

A. They made the opportunity.

B. Well yes, they made the opportunity on the basis of the philosophy by the way, you see -- this is the first time -- I don't know if I am exaggerating this or maybe I am reflecting my ignorance of world history -- but I don't know that there is any other example before this, of a group of human beings setting themselves the task of evolving a government predicated upon things such as rights, you know, and man's relationships and responsibilities to his fellow man, you see. Now I submit to you that this experiment is such a glorious and frightening and awesome one, that it would have had-- well, I don't know -- what I mean to follow this out with -- that it would have had tremendous impact, positive impact, were it not contaminated by the fact that as they were doing this, they themselves were the victims of the fact that it hadn't been done before, they were themselves the victims of human slavery, you see -- they had the past on their backs - - -

A. But how can you abolish history? The question always coming around is this, isn't it -- how does an ethical idea develop in history, it can't be born without a history, can it? And there we are, we are stuck with our history.

B. No, it can't be born -- but I don't think that is exactly what the Americans -- yes, they were stuck with their history, but they were stuck with the conqueredization of their history in the presence of the black man - -

A. And Thomas Jefferson was a slave-holder. What does that mean to you -- does that invalidate the Declaration of Independence?

B. No it doesn't invalidate the Declaration of Independence, but it imposes upon us levels of interpretation of that Declaration of Independence that go beyond the words -- you see -- that actually you cannot understand the Declaration of Independence purely in terms of Jefferson's paraphrasing of Loch alone, you see -- you have to also understand this in the context of the fact that Jefferson had slaves at the same time that he was righting this, and he not only had slaves but he was also aware of the inconsistency between what he was writing and the fact that he held slaves.

A. Do you believe in social society as an ideal?

B. Frankly Mr. Warren, I don't know what I believe in --

A. People who do are living in a capitalistic society, making their livings in it and doing the best they can.

B. No -- I have stock, I purchase stock on the stock market -- I believe in this capitalist society -- I don't believe that it is always just or sensitive or efficient -- I don't think it is as always efficient as it could be -- Not even when I was young, an undergraduate in the thirties, did I believe that there was Eutopia in the Soviet Union or -- I don't know why, don't ask me why --

B. general socialist - -

A. No, I can't get myself at this age -- I am about to be fifty, I will be fifty this year -- and at this age, I can't believe in

generalized abstract societies -- you know -- I believe in the inevitability of struggle. I believe that human beings will develop the most vital kind of society in those societies in which they are free to struggle toward developing the best that they can arrive at. I don't believe in fixed societies, and I am clearly aware of the fact that I am being incoherent now.

A. Well, I don't think so. What do you think about Robert E. Lee -- after Jefferson? Cases abstraction.

B. I think that Robert E. Lee was a gentleman -- I think, from everything I read about him, that he was also tortured. I think that he was a civilized human being who was again caught in this -- I repeat -- the inevitable moral schizophrenia that American society imposes upon all Americans, you see -- and by the way, I am not using this term moral schizophrenia necessarily in a derogatory way, because I can conceive of the absence of the moral schizophrenia, which would be stagnation, and that I think for example, the Nazis had no schizophrenies --

A. No schizophrenia - -

B. That's right, you see, so if you understand my illusion to the Nazis, you can understand what I am saying about the moral schizophrenia of America--

A. Then it had no ^{moral} schizophrenia -- nor did Stalin --nor did R

B. Nor did Stalin, you see, nor did a lot of the -- nor did does Malcolm X -- there are a lot of people who know exactly --

A. But you do -- I am beginning to feel that you do --

B. Well, I don't think that there is any question - -

A. Well, you speak -- didn't you talk about the sympathy of Lee -- you are in a situation of moral schizophrenia -- or of Jefferson,

you are in a situation of moral schizophrenia.

B. Of course. I have empathy for these men -- you know, Baldwin in one of our interviews last year - -

A. I read in the little book - -

B. I remember Baldwin said something about -- I asked him ~~which~~ was she white - ~~xxxxxx~~ -- he was talking about one of his teachers and I said "Was she white"? He said "Well, yes, she is a little bit white and a little bit colored" -- this is, I don't know how Baldwin meant that, but when I heard it, I knew that it was a penetrating truth about all Americans, you know, that they are a little bit white and a little bit colored -- I mean that it is not possible for any American with any degree with sensitivity to be -- Malcolm X to the contrary notwithstanding -- all black or all white, I mean there is an empathic shackle --

A. I suppose what I am driving at in these questions, was not a particular answer to the question, but to open the question of "How moral absolutes, ethical ideas relate to historical process" -- That is what we had sort of nagging around, I suppose.

B. I guess what we are also backing into is the realization that they don't ever determine historical process in terms of the absolutes-- the absolutes themselves don't generally determine the historical process but the constant necessity to make some kind of accommodation between or among absolutes or among forces among which might be the absolute, you see.

A. In that context, what does freedom now, mean?

B. Freedom now means a demand, it means an absolute, it means an insistence, and in the future of course, it is going to mean some kind of accommodation -- but the greater the accommodation that has

to be made, the greater the weakness of the total social fabric. Unfortunately -- oh, I don't know that it is unfortunate, it might be quite be is like -- there are many people who are stating and mouthing the slogan freedom now, who have a rather simplintic literalistic view of it, you see, and maybe this too has always been true historically, that the cutting edge of any movement must by virtue of its -- I mean, like John Brown -- cutting edge has to be literalistic in order to assume that role, you see.

A. What do you think of John Brown, by the way?

B. I think he is a very powerful force in the growth and development of this country, and - - -

A. He was a force, clearly -- what do you think of him -- how would you evaluate him morally or psychologically -- or both?

B. Well, psychologically, the simple designation of John Brown might be too simple -- he was a fanatic, a neurotic, a liberalist, an absolutist, a man who was so totally committed to his commitment that nothing including reality stood in his way.

A. How do you treat a man like that in ordinary society?

B. Society can take care of itself with men like that, it always has -- see what it did to Christ - -

A. Do you think Christ and John Brown are to be equated?

B. Oh, unquestionably --

A. Equated psychologically? In their values or simply in their neuroses?

B. In their values, in their neuroses, and of course in their end.

A. Christ said "I am the Prince of Peace" -- John Brown lived in a dream of bloodshed. That is some difference, isn't it?

B. Yes, but Christ also took -- what was it took -- ran money changes out of --

- A. but this is to be equated with the P Massacre?
- B. Alright, don't push me that far - -
- A. We have to, if we are going to talk about it, you know --
- B. Now look, Christ was clearly a person ~~was~~ committed to values other than those which were prevailing in his time.
- A. Or to our time either.
- B. Or to our time, yes. He not only was committed but the extent and depth and reality of his commitment was expressed by his life, you know -- the fact that he lived his commitment. He did not make the primary accommodation to the realities that even some of his disciples did. Alright -- Christ was a typical, Christ was alienated, Christ has values that he was willing to run -- positive values that he was willing to run risk for, and he paid the ultimate price. Christ, Socrates, John Brown -- these people are irritating --
- A. Let me ask you a question specifically -- suppose a man like John Brown, with the same burning eye, came into your office and said "I'm tired of fooling around in this matter, I'm going down to Mississippi and take six or seven strong, determined people with me and I am going to slaughter the governor and his entire staff in the Capitol and come out and say 'Rise and follow me' " -- now this is almost an exact parallel -- what would you do about this man who came to your office and asked you for a hundred dollars to help finance the trip?
- B. First, I would give him a hundred dollars --
- A. Would you give him fifty?
- B. No, I wouldn't give him anything --
- A. Would you call the police or would you wish him well?
- B. I don't think I would do either -- I don't think I would call the police because - - -

A. Would you call the doctors?

B. I would probably see what I could do to help this man, if it would not inconvenience me too much -- or if it would not involve me with him too much, or if it would not establish a clawing kind of relationship with him that I would not want to have, you see.

A. What if this man was a hypothetical man with a wild eye and a scraggly beard and a big adam's apple, who comes in this office and asks you for a hundred dollars to finance the killing of Governor Patterson and Mississippi, and John Brown, going to Murray Forbes and his other friends in Boston?

B. Me. That is ~~different~~ ^{the difference} -- me and time, you see.

A. Alright -- you know more about psychology than they did, you see, and more about history -- and therefore you wouldn't want any part of it.

B. And not only that, I am frank to say to you, I am a college professor -- I have a vested interest in either/oring, you see -- I have a vested interest in maintaining issues on a level of discussion & rather than action, and certainly anybody who says anything to me about bloodshed is not going to get a sympathetic response from me, you see.

A. You said that John Brown is like Christ, psychologically.

B. In one respect, yes.

A. In which respect was this, now?

B. The totality of his commitment, his alienations, his willingness to run risk --

A. Now, mad men are that way, too, you see -- men are mad in that way -- so we don't make man as equal virtue do you, automatically on that mere point?

B. No, except that it isn't always that easy --

A. I don't mean to maintain that it is, but I do think we ought to explore it.

B. That's right -- it isn't always easy to differentiate between a "madman" and the martyr, or the person who irritates the status quo to the point of demanding of the status quo, some kind of accommodation between where it is and where he would want it to be .

A. If the madman happens to tie in with the moral cause and happens to have the bad or good luck to get bumped off in the process, you see --

B. Who else does this except madmen?

A. We must trust the madman, is that it, to be our moral guardians?

B. Let me back up a little. Madmen -- of course you could define madness as daring to believe that something which you value and believe is so important, that it is worth risking your security, your comfort or your stagnation for -- you could define madness as any kind of alienation which brings you in open conflict with the prevailing values and patterns of your society. So defines, yes -- I would say who else but madmen defies constituted authority or ways of life.

A. So we must depend on madmen --

B. So defined --

A. You are defining them clinically now, is that it?

B. I am not defining them clinically because -- I am defining mad men to mean those who believe something so deeply, so strongly, as to --

A. Suppose a man is also clinically mad -- let's just assume this-- then what do we do about his relation to an idea?

B. Well, it is all very easy -- it's extremely easy --

A. He is mad -- he is clinically mad, but he also utters truths in his clinical madness, or does it get tied in with an action --

B. I am more concerned with Vangl's paintings than I am with the fact that he was mad. I must confess that I will probably be more concerned with what the man says and stands for and does--

A. Lets take it this way -- we don't know the real facts, so we can't be sure -- but you judge the morality of an act by the consequences, consequences and not by the nature of the act, is that it?

B. Mr. Warren, you're pushing me -- No, I am not always sure that I would judge morality of acts only by the consequences -- I think there are some acts which on their face, are moral without regard to consequences, and could not therefore possibly have moral consequences -- I mean, I think that even if one sought to rationalize consequences on the grounds that they were morally, these consequences would be contaminated by the immorality of the act - -

A. John Brown is almost a test case for this - -

B. Boy, you certainly are fascinated with John Brown and he is one of the most --

A. He is a test case -- you brought him up, I didn't.

B. Alright, I brought him up -- I'm not going to abandon John Brown -- you're right, John Brown was an addict, John Brown was mad, John Brown was a murderer, John Brown was clearly not respectable but --

A. How much does the word 'respectable' take back the ~~condemnation~~ ^{condemnation} in the other foot words? You are a psychologist --

B. A great deal -- I suppose I deliberately put 'respectable' at the end of that --

A. To disinfect murder?

B. No, not necessarily to disinfect murder, but to deal with the fact -- the reality, that respectable abolitionists were talking quite

a bit, and while I would not join John Brown's party of murderers, any more than I would join Malcolm X's call for a -- what did he call it -- rifle club or something of that sort -- and I personally recoil against bloodshed because I think this is just another form of human idiocy. The fact still remains that major social changes toward social justice in human history, have come almost always -- if not always -- through irrational and questionable methods.

A. That is -- we have to play a double game in terms of all social movements, is that right -- we play a game of making somebody else pick up the dirty marbles for us -- a white man in a nice house in Belmead, Nashville or in Jackson suburbs -- let those cops and those rednecks pick up the marbles down there on North Barry St. or Lynch St., while they keep it clean -- is this it? You and I have played the same game in terms of history -- we expecting the boys to make the ~~kit~~ big stink that is a real threat to a reasonable proposal, is that it?

B. That's one way of putting it -- I would prefer not to put it that way, I would prefer to put it this way, that apparently rational reasonable men, who are seeking a change in the status quo, are generally ineffectual -- changes in the status quo are more likely to come from irrational, unreasonable, questionable men.

- - - - -

To be continued on tape #3.